# FLORIDA KEYS WILDERNESS PROPOSAL

MONROE COUNTY, FLORIDA

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES OF THE FLORIDA KEYS

NATIONAL KEY DEER REFUGE
GREAT WHITE HERON NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
KEY WEST NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

## INTRODUCTION

The National Key Deer Refuge, the Great White Heron, and the Key West National Wildlife Refuges stretch into the Gulf of Mexico for nearly 60 miles off the southern tip of Florida. These Refuges of the Florida Keys contain numerous keys, or islands, many within sight of one another. They are the home of many "threatened" species of birds and a limited number are the only habitat of the diminutive Key deer. With the exception of those keys touched by the Miami-Key West Overseas Highway, the refuge keys are roadless, undeveloped islands. Total Bureau ownership within the three refuges is 6,389 acres. Privately-owned land under lease for refuge purposes increases the total refuge-administered acreage to 11,321. Refuge holdings and leased lands are interspersed with many privately controlled lands. Refuge ownership extends to mean high tide. The State of Florida has dedicated a large portion of the State-owned land and waterbottom within the Great White Heron Refuge as a wildlife sanctuary.

The Wilderness Act of September 3, 1964 (Public Law 88-577), provided the authority and indicated the procedure by which National Wildlife Refuges, meeting the necessary requirements, are to be considered for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. This law directed the review of every roadless area of 5,000 contiguous acres or more and every roadless island within the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The provisions of Section 4(a) and 4(b) of the Wilderness Act stipulate that a wilderness area shall be supplemental to the purposes for which National Wildlife Refuges are established; that wilderness areas shall be devoted to the public purposes for recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use, insofar as primary refuge objectives permit.

KEY DEER

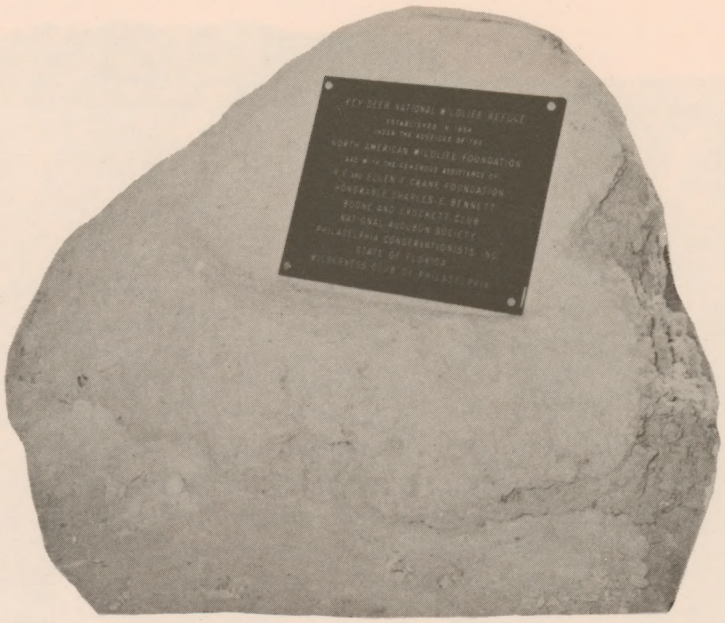
# HISTORY

The Calusa Indians were the first known inhabitants of the Florida Keys. They lived well off the land for nearly 2,000 years before the first Spanish explorers arrived in Florida in the early 1500's. When Ponce de Leon explored Florida in 1513, he called the Florida Keys "The Martires" or The Martyrs. To Ponce de Leon the Keys looked like ghosts of martyred men standing side by side as he recalled how many brave men had lost their lives on the treacherous coral reef. Hernando d'Escalante Fontaneda, a Spanish cabin boy who was shipwrecked on the keys and spent 17 years with the Indians, recorded in 1575 the first lengthy description of the Calusas and the Keys.

Fontaneda's writings stressed the scenic beauty of the keys and the abundance of wildlife—deer, rabbits, raccoons, crocodiles, and birds. These creatures and the vegetation of the Keys captivated early men of science. The intense interest of Dr. Henry Perrine in the plants of the Keys and John James Audubon's concentrated study and authentic paintings of the birdlife in the early 1800's were only examples of the notable conservation interest in the fauna and flora of the Keys to be taken by thousands of people nearly a century later.

A TYPICAL CAMPSITE OF THE WARDENS WHO GUARDED THE BIRD ROOKERIES IN THE EVERGLADES AND KEYS IN THE 1940'S.

BROWN PELICAN



A BRONZE PLAQUE AT THE KEY DEER REFUGE HEADQUARTERS RECOGNIZES THE PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS WHO PLAYED A MAJOR ROLE IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE REFUGE.

By the late 1800's, the birds of the Keys were in the national spotlight. The once plentiful egrets, herons, spoonbills, and other beautifully plumed birds were being killed indiscriminately to supply feathers for a lucrative millinery market. The magnificent rookeries were headed for extermination.

The Audubon Society came to the rescue of the birds in early 1900 by hiring wardens to watch over the rookeries. The shooting in 1905 of Warden Guy M. Bradley by a plume hunter in the Florida Everglades and the accused's widely publicized trial at Key West served to unify the Audubon Society into a strong national organization—one that was to contribute eventually to saving the birds from extinction. President Theodore Roosevelt gave added impetus to the conservation movement in the Keys by establishing the Key West National Wildlife Refuge in 1908. The Great White Heron Refuge was established thirty years later.

While the efforts of the early Audubon and Federal wardens saved the vanishing bird rookeries from extinction, yet another animal was on the brink of oblivion—the Key deer. This tiny deer, found only in the Florida Keys, had been seriously reduced in numbers by illegal killing. By 1949, fewer than 50 Key deer could be accounted for. The campaign to save this vanishing species was one of the most moving chapters in the nation's conservation history. Through the efforts of many local people, as well as national organizations, the plight of the "toy deer" received national attention. Nearly ten years of intensive work resulted in the passage of the Key Deer Act by Congress and the establishment of the National Key Deer Refuge in 1957. Many individuals donated or leased land to the refuge to supplement the acreage restrictions placed in the Key Deer Act.

The Rare and Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966 provided authority for use of Land and Water Conservation Funds for acquisition of additional lands for the Key deer. Land acquisition under this Act has progressed very rapidly until today Bureau ownership of an effective refuge acreage for the Key deer now appears within reach.

## DESCRIPTION

The Florida Keys are situated on a massive reef of coral which is believed to have risen above sea level nearly 50,000 years ago. A very thin topsoil covers most of the keys and consists primarily of fine white sand. Many of the smaller keys are completely covered with water during extremely high tide. The average elevation is four feet above sea level.

Most of the keys are densely vegetated. A few have open areas and sandy beaches. Fresh water is lacking on most of the keys. However, the limestone, on Big Pine Key especially, has many natural pockets or solution holes that retain rainwater for long periods of time.

The vegetation on the Keys is typically semi-tropical. The islands are fringed with a heavy growth of red and black mangrove and many are completely covered with mangrove. On the slightly higher elevations and away from the water's edge on a few of the larger keys, a great variety of trees and shrubs are found, including such species as white mangrove, scrub palmetto, Jamaica dogwood, gumbo-limbo, pidgeon plum, sea grape, red bay and poisonwood. Wild orchids or air plants and many tropical exotics are found within the Key Deer Refuge, making this an area of intense interest to botanists from all over the world. On Big Pine Key alone, at least 300 species of plants have been found.

The waters surrounding the keys are very shallow. These warm, clear waters abound in shrimp, sponge, crawfish, and numerous species of salt water fishes. The vast water area is vitally important to the total biotic community of fish, birds, man, and other animals. Submerged stands of shoalgrass, various algae, and other marine plants offer hiding places for newly spawned fish and shrimp and food for birds and fish. A veritable underwater scenic paradise is located in slightly deeper waters away from the islands. Here beautiful coral formations are interwoven with remnants of shipwrecks of a by-gone day. Tropical fishes, sea urchins, tunneling mollusks, and sponges are but a few of the marine species listed in comprehensive volumes that scientists have compiled on the marine life of the coral reef. Nearly 600 species of fish have been named in the coral reef and the adjacent shallow water near the keys.

BIG PINE KEY

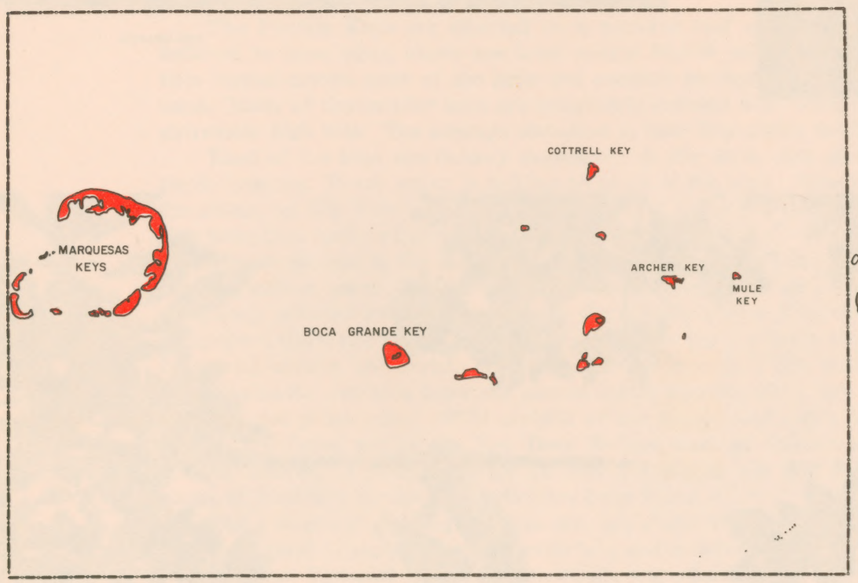
SEA GRAPES

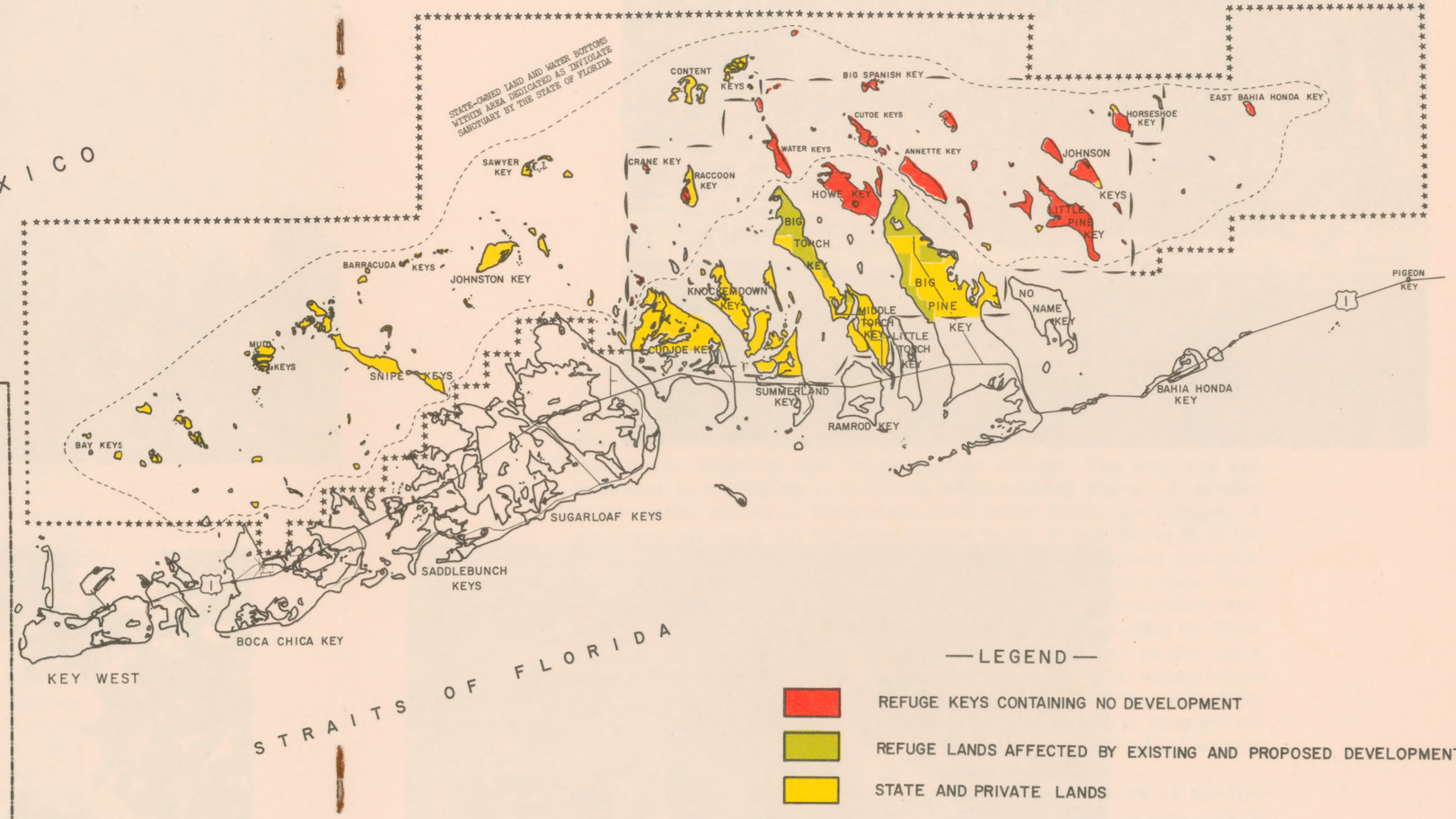
# FLORIDA KEYS WILDERNESS PROPOSAL

## NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES OF THE FLORIDA KEYS

PROCLAMATION BOUNDARIES

- GREAT WHITE HERON NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
- NATIONAL KEY DEER REFUGE
- KEY WEST NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE




— LEGEND —

- REFUGE KEYS CONTAINING NO DEVELOPMENT
- REFUGE LANDS AFFECTED BY EXISTING AND PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT
- STATE AND PRIVATE LANDS

AMERICAN ALLIGATOR

GREAT WHITE HERON

BALD EAGLE

## WILDLIFE

The birdlife of the Refuges of the Florida Keys include rare and beautiful species. The Florida great white heron, a bird designated as "rare," is found in the Keys and on the southern part of the Florida mainland. The Southern bald eagle, another endangered species, is a frequent visitor. The American osprey and Eastern brown pelican, birds that need special attention, nest throughout the refuges. The Keys are also important as a breeding area for the white-crowned pigeon. A number of peripheral species of birds make their home within the refuges. A peripheral species is one whose occurrence in the United States is at the edge of its natural range. Those in the Keys include roseate spoonbill, Eastern reddish egret, Atlantic sooty tern, Florida mangrove cuckoo, West Indian nighthawk, Cuban black-whiskered vireo, and Cuban yellow warbler. A total of 185 species of birds have been observed within the three refuges. Gulls and terns are especially abundant and nest on the sandy beaches. Total use from nesting shore and water birds approximates nearly three million use days during a single summer. Of the many birds found in the Keys, some are seen nowhere else in the country. They include West Indian forms of tropical affinity as well as wintering birds of western distribution.

The Florida Keys are perhaps best known as the home of the Key deer. This diminutive race of the white-tailed deer can be seen only in this area and even here only a few keys within the Key Deer Refuge have suitable habitat and sufficient fresh water vital to the deer's survival. From less than 50 individuals in 1949, the Key deer population now numbers about 400 as a result of refuge protection. The Key deer is classified as endangered and requires a continued management effort if the present population level is to be maintained. The only other land mammal which is frequently seen on the Keys is the raccoon, a pale local form that has almost lost the rings from its tail.

There are a number of species of reptiles within the refuge. Snakes are the most abundant. The American alligator, an endangered species, and the American crocodile, a peripheral species, are also found within the refuges. The sandy beaches, and in particular those within the Key West Refuge, are vitally important to the Loggerhead sea turtle. These giant turtles return to the Keys annually to deposit their eggs.

## DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT

The primary purpose of the Refuges of the Florida Keys is to provide protection to the many species of nesting birds and the Key deer. Particular emphasis is given to the retention of the habitat in an unaltered condition. These same basic goals will remain unchanged in the future. The unique natural resources of the area cannot be replaced if once destroyed; therefore, careful planning is necessary to permit maximum perpetuation of the unusual fauna and flora of the Keys.

No recreational development is planned on the majority of the refuge keys. However, facilities to meet the needs of an ever-increasing visitation are planned on the keys which contain roads and are already partially developed. Refuge lands on Big Pine Key, Big Torch Key, and Middle Torch Key are already accessible via public roads, and adjacent private lands on these keys are being rapidly developed. The refuge lands on these keys will be zoned to accommodate a more intensive public use associated with wildlife-oriented activities. Nature trails and observation towers will provide this close-to-nature experience for the thousands of visitors. A wildlife interpretive center, Key deer display enclosure, and refuge administrative buildings are planned for Big Pine Key just off U.S. Highway 1. Other refuge lands are essentially wild and no developments are planned.

Major recreational use on the refuges are wildlife watching, sport fishing, wildlife photography, sightseeing, botanical study and boating. These uses will continue to be permitted. However, visits to major bird rookeries must be controlled during nesting periods. More intensive uses will be centered on those keys accessible via road. Protecting nesting birds from disturbance, preventing illegal shooting, and maintaining the keys in a natural state are the major management considerations on the keys outside of the deer range.

REFUGE HEADQUARTERS—BIG PINE KEY

PROPOSED WILDLIFE INTERPRETIVE CENTER AND KEY DEER DISPLAY PEN - BIG PINE KEY.

## RELATIONSHIP TO SURROUNDING AREAS

South Florida is one of the fastest growing sections of the country. Much of this growth is now, and will in the future, take place in the Florida Keys and the southern coastal area. The vegetative cover on Big Pine, Little Torch, Summerland, Cudjo, and Sugarloaf Keys is being leveled to make way for more people. Along the Overseas Highway, waterbottoms and tidal lands are being dredged and filled. The population of the Keys is expected to more than double by the year 2000. As private lands continue to be developed, the refuges will become increasingly more important. It is possible that the unique scenery, Key deer habitat, rare and endangered bird nesting sites and feeding areas may one day be found only on those keys left under refuge protection.

The Refuges of the Florida Keys are situated in an area heavily developed by both public and private recreational areas. The Miami-Miami Beach resort area is only about 150 miles to the northeast and the city of Key West is situated very near the boundary of the Great White Heron and Key West Refuges. The much-traveled Overseas Highway runs adjacent to the Key Deer and Great White Heron Refuges. Fishing villages, tourist facilities, and residences dot the landscape along this route. Boat launching ramps, both private and State owned, are plentiful throughout those Keys that have highway access. Roadside parks and picnic areas are numerous along the Overseas Highway.

The Florida Park Service operates three major areas within the Keys. These are the 50,000-acre John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, Bahia Honda State Park, Long Key State Park, and Cowpens State Park. Monroe County has a number of small public parks. Within a day's drive is the U.S. Park Service's Everglades National Park which contains nearly 1½ million acres. The Fort Jefferson National Monument is 60 miles offshore from Key West.

The Refuges of the Florida Keys enhance the many public and private recreational areas in South Florida. By retaining the refuges in a primitive condition, opportunities for unique outdoor recreational experiences that are truly wilderness in character will be assured for future visitors to South Florida.

SOOTY TERNS

## SUMMARY

The Refuges of the Florida Keys have contributed to the preservation of rare and endangered species and their habitat since the early 20th Century when the Key West National Wildlife Refuge was established as one of the first refuges. The refuge's role in the protection of many "threatened" species of colonial nesting birds and the "near extinct" Key deer is without parallel anywhere else in the country! To see a bit of the natural landscape of the Keys with their many exotic plants, magnificent birds, and surrounding clear waters is an outdoor recreational opportunity which attracts thousands of visitors into the refuge vicinity annually. The rapid residential and commercial development in the Keys is constantly reducing the habitat and space needed for wildlife. Refuge lands, with limited development and carefully planned recreational facilities, will insure the preservation of a primitive area capable of providing a place where man can reflect on the past while gaining an insight into the meaning of a natural ecosystem where plants and wildlife share the environment with him.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
BUREAU OF SPORT FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE

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*The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.*

## INSPECTION

Anyone concerned about this proposal is urged to personally inspect the Refuges in the Florida Keys. Additional information may be obtained from the Refuge Manager, National Key Deer Refuge, Box 385, Big Pine Key, Florida 33040, or the Regional Director, Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Peachtree-Seventh Building, Atlanta, Georgia 30323.

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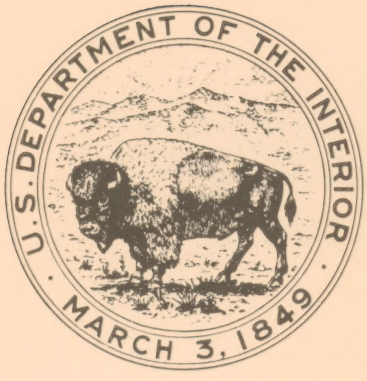
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